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Civil Engineers make Baghdad better place to live

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BAGHDAD – Responsible for the rebuilding of Baghdad’s essential services, such as the restoration and improvement of electricity, water, sewer and transportation systems, the members of the 4th Brigade Combat Team Infrastructure Coordination Element have their work cut out for them.

A daunting task that requires support from the Iraqi government, several U.S. governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations, reconstruction efforts are one of the many missions facing the 4th BCT, 4th Infantry Division.

“We bridge the gap by developing relationships, not only with the Iraqis, to gain their priorities – that is really where we are trying to focus – but also with the (Iraqi) state department (ministers) that are currently standing up,” said Maj. Ray Proske, executive officer, 4th Special Troops Battalion, 4th BCT,

The coordination cell works with local leaders within the communities and neighborhoods to identify and service their particular needs – working to coordinate the repair of Iraqi essential services within the brigade’s prescribed area of operations.

“Each of the different areas has its unique challenges,” Proske said. “One thing to keep in mind: most of the infrastructure in this country was built more than 20 years ago and has been very poorly maintained – and especially since 1990.”

The problem is also complicated by numerous unauthorized taps on the city’s water and electrical systems, further draining an already depleted infrastructure, said Proske.

This will only be resolved once the city begins to regulate the services it provides to the people living in Baghdad, he added.

The biggest task before the four-man team, which is responsible for overseeing special reconstruction projects in central and south Baghdad, is working with the local Iraqi governance to ensure that the planning, upkeep and improvement of city systems happens as efficiently as possible.

The engineers are trying to overcome this challenge by hiring local Iraqi engineers to maintain and supervise the many ongoing projects and to assist in quality assurance, thus ensuring the contractors are providing an adequate product, said Proske.

“Though we have a small staff, the local Iraqi engineers are absolutely vital to operations for the ICE,” he said.

Currently, the program has one local consultant engineer, an Iraqi man named Thamer, who wears many hats.

Thamer, a 46-year old electrical engineer, is responsible for identifying all the scopes of work within the communities and coordinating the execution of each project through the different government agencies.

“After that, we bid for those projects. We call contractors, and we give them those bids to submit it at those prices,” Thamer said. “We analyze the price and compare it with the quantity to see if it is reasonable or not.”

Thamer, who earned his masters degree in engineering from the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, also manages several Iraqi site engineers, who supervise the local contractors to ensure the quality of work, and that the projects are completed in a timely manner.

After the project is finished, the ICE also maintains contacts with the two district advisory councils within the brigade’s battle space and the Iraqi government to ensure that the completed work meets the Iraqi people’s needs.

“Our goal is to give a very good project to serve the people,” Thamer said. “We are in constant contact with the departments and the employees with the district council in order to coordinate with the contractors.”

Capt. Robert Graetz, sewers project manager, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th STB, said he hopes that the projects being completed now will eventually lay the groundwork for larger construction projects that will increase the capabilities of the current systems.

As the civil engineers work to improve living conditions for the communities, they are also working to help the Iraqi people become self-sufficient.

“A good solution is, instead of throwing a lot of money into project after project, invest funding into the city government to prop up their operating budget so that they can do it themselves,” said Graetz, a native of Union Grove, Wis.

A West Point graduate with a masters degree from the University of Missouri – Rolla, Graetz said that one way the U.S. Army is accomplishing this goal is by providing equipment, training and technical expertise to the maintenance departments and the local communities within the districts.

Most of the projects beginning during 4th BCT’s deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom will take a while to complete, said Graetz. In fact, many of the end effects of the projects will not be seen until after 4th BCT has completed its mission and redeployed.

Despite this fact, “generally, making Baghdad a better place to live,” will remain the ICE Cell’s primary mission and full-time job, said Graetz.